

Also -- Long-Delayed Disaster Aid Will Help Vt. Farmers With Flood Losses

Washington, D.C. - In a high-stakes and long-sought victory for Vermont's dairy farmers, legislation needed to pave the way for a full extension and expansion of the MILC program - the safety net that helps dairy farmers ride out downturns in milk prices - is finally on its way to becoming law.

The House and Senate Thursday were expected to pass a mid-year supplemental appropriations bill that includes legislation backed by the Vermont Congressional Delegation and authored by Sen. Patrick Leahy (D) that will extend the funding baseline for the MILC program - a condition for extending the program in the new Farm Bill now being drafted in Congress. The President is expected to sign the bill.

The MILC (Milk Income Loss Contract) provisions are included in domestic appropriations that are part of a spending bill that also includes funding for U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, Katrina relief efforts and for other purposes. The members of the Vermont Delegation - Leahy, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I) and Rep. Peter Welch (D) - voted no on the overall package because benchmarks were weakened for removing U.S. troops from Iraq.

The bill also includes about \$3 billion in farm disaster relief funds long awaited by farmers in Vermont and in other states but which were blocked last year by the Republican-led Congress, and it also sets aside another \$16 million to help dairy farmers in Vermont and other states.

The Leahy MILC legislation provides a 10-year baseline that ensures mandatory funding for the MILC program and would lay the groundwork for reauthorizing and expanding the program in this year's Farm Bill. Leahy, Sanders and Welch worked closely together to advance the Senate's MILC provisions as part of their partnership in building a coalition of support for extending and improving the MILC program in the multi-year Farm Bill.

Leahy, a senior member of the Senate Appropriations Committee which handled the bill, said, "This is the key to all else we will do this year to keep the MILC program alive. We fought long odds to get this done because we know how vital this safety net is to Vermont and Vermont's

farmers."

Sanders said, "Family dairy farmers in Vermont and across the country are up against the wall. Because of arcane congressional budget rules, this one-month extension of the MILC program will provide the funding we need during the Farm Bill to create an even stronger safety net for our hard-pressed dairy farmers. We still have a big fight ahead of us but this is an extremely important step forward."

Welch said, "Our farmers are hanging on by their fingernails and we are committed to doing whatever we can to support the future of Vermont farmers. This baseline extension represents major progress, but Senator Leahy, Senator Sanders and I are in this fight for Vermont agriculture for the long-haul."

Leahy, Sanders and Welch also said this bill likely was the last chance to enact the farm disaster aid, which will help Vermont farmers recover from last year's flood losses. "This relief is overdue, but it's still needed," said Leahy. "These are tough times for farmers, and our job has been to find a way around the obstacles the White House has set on farmers' road to recovery."